

# BACK STAGE WEST

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## REVIEWS

### RESA FANTASTISK MYSTISK

at Theatre of NOTE

Reviewed by Laura Weinert



Thanks to the heroic efforts of scholar/director/choreographer Todd Merrill, Swedish gooseherder-cum-playwright Lars Mattsun finally has his day in the sun—a day which signals the emergence of an unsung theatrical genius who, only about 100 years late, may change the face of theatre as we know it.

Merrill has taken great pains to unearth and adapt *Resa Fantastisk Mystisk*, a never-before seen masterpiece by this little known playwright, whose life work was sadly eclipsed by that of his contemporary August Strindberg. (Some Mattsun aficionados even accuse Strindberg of plagiarism, though it's never been proven conclusively.) A work woven with divine imagery and laced with "brandy tart" moments (Merrill's term)—moments in which Mattsun attempts to give expression to life's subtly wrenching dichotomies—*Resa* is an ambitious depiction of the theme of art vs. commerce, a struggle in which the soul has only one way out of its hell: "retribution and death."

Written during Mattsun's Fruit Period (1900-1905), "during which his plays included many references to different varieties of tree-grown fruit," *Resa* employs the dream idiom to guide us through a young man's struggle to escape from his psychological hell. To aid us in tackling Mattsun's complex symbolic language, Merrill graciously offers the audience headsets, through which he provides insightful commentary on the history and significance of each scene.

At the start we find the young artist Philip (Victor Ortado) awaiting his marriage to Mariah (Selina Smith), a woman with bandaged hands—a handicap which seems to represent her inability to grasp Philip's delicate predicament, or perhaps, more generally, gives emphasis to their incompatibility (Philip is a man who crafts art with his hands), or perhaps has no significance whatsoever. Philip is not without his own disability, though: As Merrill helps us to observe in the first scene, Philip is unable to walk backwards. The profundity and metaphorical significance becomes obvious, as we later witness Philip struggling tragically with elements from his past.

Enter a mysterious child spectre (Laura Otis) who leads Philip through a dream world in which he is to confront his past and present demons. He meets a candlemaker, played by Carolyn Almos, whose single, flesh-colored candle serves to illuminate the scene's phallicism. Merrill informs us. The candle's sudden

disappearance in a explosion of smoke (though the pyrotechnics were not functioning properly on the evening I attended, Merrill assured us that the effect of the smoke is truly extraordinary) becomes an apt metaphor for Philip's detachment from the sexual realm.

Along the dream odyssey, Philip meets Puss Puss the cat (Joel Marshall), with whom he engages in an athletically choreographed wrestling scene intended to illuminate his sexual frustrations ("You should know," intones Merrill, "that the cat is very *vulvic* in nature"). Though by all outward appearances, Puss Puss is just your average domestic cat, in Mattsun's extraordinary vision he functions as a powerful spirit guide into Philip's past. (A note to director Merrill: Though you were obviously vexed that Marshall forgot to wear an elaborately costumed mask at the performance I attended, not to worry—Joel's precise feline movements allowed us to forgive his forgetfulness.)

Before he can recover his ability to walk backwards and thus resolve his dilemma, Philip must confront masculinity—personified, naturally, by a general (Katharine Noon) and a matador (Jon Beauregard). Beauregard's bizarre habit of pulling up his pant legs, his blatant departure from Merrill's careful choreography, and his refusal to wear socks ("This dialogue was not meant to be performed by a sockless dork," snapped Merrill) make the final scenes frustrating and difficult to critique.

Indeed, while the production is plagued with a sense of impending disaster and chaos, these only serve to infuse the piece with the kind of "life energy" that no amount of polish or rehearsal could achieve. Curiously, an "alternative" program for *Resa* has been circulating, apparently without Merrill's authorization, claiming that the show is the work of people called, preposterously, "The Burglars of Hamm, the Ghost Road Company, and director Matt Almos." (Yeah, like those are real names.) This further layer of disturbing ambiguity only adds to the excitement surrounding this earth-shattering theatrical epiphany.

*"Resa Fantastisk Mystisk," presented by the Burglars of Hamm and the Ghost Road Company at Theatre of NOTE, 1517 Cahwenga Blvd., Hollywood. Mon.-Tues. 9 p.m. Nov. 8- Dec. 14. \$10. (323) 856-8611.*

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of Hamm